

Iraq chance for Ukraine: to Europe via America?

RESEARCH UPDATE

Vol. 9. No. 20/315, May 19, 2003

Viktor Zamiatin, Europe XXI Foundation, for UCIPR

Next week will definitely be a culmination for Ukraine's foreign policy, given the imperatives of its true course for the next few years. Here I mean, first of all, the "return of the Ukrainian-American relations to a constructive straight", as Ukrainian and U.S. diplomats put it. In other words, the issues to be addressed include further development of the Ukraine - NATO relations, as well as Ukraine's strategic partnership with Russia (Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov will visit Kyiv on May 19 and 20).

The top issue that may be affected by all of the above and will, in its turn, affect other developments is what sort of a decision will the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine approve regarding the possible contribution of the Ukrainian military force to take part in stabilization activities in Iraq, how will that decision be motivated, how will it be pulled through the parliament and what sort of consequences will it have.

The issue was in the spotlight of tripartite Ukrainian-Polish-American consultations at the level of deputy foreign ministers in Kyiv on May 13, and of the meeting of the Ukrainian-American Foreign Policy Committee on the next day.

Today none of the interested parties - Kyiv, Washington or Warsaw - hides the existence of the proposal made by the United States to the Ukrainian leaders to send a military unit to Iraq so that it would participate in the stabilization operation of the Coalition, earlier known as the coalition "for disarming Saddam Hussein", led by the USA and the UK. It was announced in Warsaw in early May that the Ukrainian force is invited to the so-called "Polish zone of responsibility" in Iraq. The possibility was first discussed after the meeting of the Coalition representatives in London on April 30.

Second assistant to the Undersecretary of State Stephen Pifer said on April 14 in Kyiv that Ukraine could make a very important contribution to the creation of the stabilization forces in Iraq and the implementation of projects of the post-war reconstruction of that country (Interfax-Ukraina, May 14, 2003). Ukraine has a number of capacities that could be useful for Iraq, the American diplomat said, referring to the experience of the Ukrainian-Polish battalion and the cooperation between the Ukrainian and American military. It Washington D.C. is has been also stressed that Ukraine is among the countries that had preliminary agreed to send their military units to Iraq. By the way, such a commitment was made earlier by Azerbaijan and Georgia. At an international conference in Warsaw on May 22-23 the participants will discuss a more detailed plan of Ukraine's possible involvement in the operation in Iraq.

Ukrainian Foreign Ministers Anatoly Zlenko said in Kyiv on May 15 that the decision to send the Ukrainian troops to Iraq would be approved within the next 7-10 days (Interfax-Ukraina, May 15, 2003). The Foreign Ministry argues that such a decision meets Ukraine's national interests.

Some time before support for such a decision was voiced by Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council Yevhen Marchuk.

The Ukrainian expert circles view the situation as a chance that must not be missed. The chance, if used properly, may contribute to normalizing the relations between Ukraine and the United States and the UK that has been damaged by the last year scandal over the approval by the Ukrainian top leadership of a possibility to sell the "Kolchuga" radar systems to Iraq. Today the situation with "Kolchugas" is remembered in Washington as if saying that "nothing has been forgotten, but it's not a proper time to talk about that". Furthermore, the "Iraq chance" makes it possible for Kyiv to announce itself as a subject of global politics. That possibility was lost with the beginning of the "tape" scandal and almost completely buried by the "Kolchuga" case. In this context, one may regard a likely decision of the executive branch and the parliament to send the Ukrainian troops to Iraq as a step towards "Euro-Atlantic integration" of Ukraine, i.e., the movement aiming at joining NATO - if not very soon, than in the medium

run. The chance that Ukraine has received nowadays may be compared to that received by Romania and Bulgaria in 1999, when they fully supported the NATO operation against Yugoslavia and received favorable attitude when the possibility of inviting them to join NATO was discussed. The difference, though, is that NATO so far has not been involved in Iraq. The decision to get involved, according to NATO Secretary General George Robertson, has not been taken yet. On the other hand, there is no doubt that NATO will overcome the current "Transatlantic gap" between "continental Europe" and the USA. Furthermore, the stabilization operation in Iraq is likely to come under NATO control in the near future. Probably that will be the first example of "NATO's new face". In that case it is likely that the U.S. will respond to a conscious and politically risky decision of the Ukrainian leadership by supporting not a broader and deeper cooperation with Ukraine, but Ukraine's accession to NATO. Therefore, the Ukrainian political establishment - that so far has followed Lenin's principle of "one step forward, two steps back" - will have to make its European integration policy more clear and will have to make unequivocal political statement that will leave no room for phrases like "it's too early today to apply".

Therefore, the decision to send the Ukrainian unit to Iraq may be seen as a step towards creating an atmosphere in which such an application "to NATO" may be considered with support of the world's most influential state. Other conditions that would help a positive reaction to such an application were enumerated at a recent conference in Washington by Yevhen Marchuk: implementation of the Action Plan, fulfilling the benchmarks for 2003, and achieving support of the majority of the population. The conference, by the way, reflected a generally positive inclination of representatives of the NATO member states to have a frank dialogue with Ukraine - a political dialogue included.

Summing up, one may say that this time geopolitics, geostrategy and geography do not overlap, and Ukraine has received a chance to come closer to its cherished "European space" through the USA by means of showing itself properly in Iraq. Moreover, the issue today is in fact the creation of a new transatlantic bridge in which the link between Poland and Ukraine will play a role of one of the pillars. The Iraq experience in creation of that bridge promises to not to be the last effort. By the way, it is repeated off the record in Kyiv that Poland will not be able to satisfy its newest ambitions without using Ukraine's potential. Hence, Ukraine is facing the need to engage in a smart and careful diplomatic game that can be a component of success.

The risks nowadays can be seen in several spheres at a time. On the one hand, it is the fact that the Ukrainian population does not perceive the war as a due cause, while the war itself is hard to explain in generally accepted categories of morals and international law. On the other hand, participation of Ukrainian soldiers in the stabilization force in Iraq cannot be seen as a kind of vacation for them. The operation promises to be more difficult than peace-keeping efforts in the Balkans - particularly taking into account the factor of the territory populated by the Kurds. The Kurds, who live on the territory to be included in the so-called "Polish zone of responsibility", fully supported the war. However, Kurds of Iraq and Turkey, the ally state of the USA, demand the creation of their own state. The circumstance adds dangerous intrigue to the general situation. Ukraine's legislation does not have a precedent; the current laws do not envisage sending troops abroad under such circumstances. Therefore, the political decision demands either violation of the law or changing the law as soon as possible. Iraq today does not have a central authority that could be a party in negotiations with Ukraine about inviting its military troops for deployment in the country. Yet, both Ukrainian law-makers and executive officials believe that the decision to send troops to Iraq will be able to collect the necessary number of supporting votes if brought to the parliament for approval. The discussions of the quality and quantity of the Ukrainian unit and the way it is going to be funded have just begun. The United States has already sent a preliminary list of specific questions, and some of them have been already provided with similarly preliminary answers. So far it is only known to date that, according to Yevhen Marchuk, the Ukrainian unit will not participate in policing operations in Iraq (the Den', May 12, 2003).

Pluses of the decision that is likely to be approved in Kyiv these days are not only in strategic movement of Ukrainian politics, but also in the near business prospects. Ukrainian companies may gain access to participation in projects of post-war reconstruction of Iraq's economy, access to Iraq oil and possibilities to get involved in its transportation through the Odessa-Brody route, as well as regaining its positions in the once familiar market and the restoration of trade. The decision to send the chemical protection battalion to Iraq has already - as some U.S. diplomats hinted - brought Ukrainian companies closer to prospects of participation in Iraq projects as subcontractors. Next step may bring Ukraine even closer to success. However, one may remember that at some point Ukraine "successfully" missed chances to make money on the post-war reconstruction in Bosnia or Kosovo. One should also keep in mind that there will be always the question about the price for getting contracts in Iraq.

BY all means, one should not forget about the "Russian factor". Russia, whose companies have serious interests in Iraq, is hardly interested in having a new competitor, even the one of a different "weight category". Today Moscow will try, on the one hand, to bring relations with Washington to the "pre-Iraq" condition and, on the other hand, either to prevent Ukrainians from coming to Iraq or, if that fails, to become the boss of the process. In any case, this issue cannot be avoided in discussions with Russia, and any agreements reached are not likely to become public. Like anything that the Ukrainian leaders tend to agree about with the Kremlin...